Conditions of their own making: An intellectual history of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham

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Abstract

Abstract: The focus of this essay is on the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham – its historical context, its organizational difficulties, its activist aspirations, and the tensions that those who participated in its development perceived between its intellectual and political objectives. Résumé: Le but de cet essai est d’analyser le Centre d’études culturelles contemporaines de l’Université de Birmingham – son contexte historique, ses difficultés organisationnelles, ses aspirations activistes, et les tensions que ceux qui ont participé à sa création ont perçues entre ses objectifs intellectuels et politiques.

Keywords

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Cultural studies emerged in Britain in the late 1950s and subsequently spread internationally, notably to the United States and Australia. Originally identified with the Center for English at the University of Birmingham in 1962, Richard Hoggart announced his intention to conduct research into ‘mass’ culture. Two years later, Hoggart had founded the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Under the directorship of first Hoggart and then Stuart Hall and Richard Johnson, and with the commitment of Michael Green throughout, the Centre operated at the intersections of literary criticism, sociology, history and anthropology. The Centre had few members of staff and much of the work it produced was the result of collaborations between students, many of whom came from backgrounds that were under-represented in universities. Cultural Studies 50 Years On: History, Practice and Politics, edited by Kieran Connell and Matthew Hilton, is a collection of essays that emerged from a 2014 conference that explored the legacy and influence of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham. Why Cultural Studies? is a searing, single-authored polemic by Gilbert B Rodman on the current state of cultural studies and a rallying call to reinvigorate the project by resuscitating its leftist impulses. In this article, I consider what these two books might